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JNA

For King and Freedom

CHAPTER I.

A Villain Well Served.

BASIL DE VAUX, the next-of-kin to Oswald de Burgh, had asserted his rights to Nottingham Castle, and had been received with open arms by the Normans.

In Basil de Vaux they had a man after their own heart. He was rich, cruel, and, what was still better in the eyes of his friends, he vowed to avenge Oswald de Burgh's death.

About twenty-five years of age, dark, strong, a great hunter, and fond of giving entertainments on a vast scale, he was just the sort of man for the land grabbers of that period.

They held that the Saxons, being a conquered people, could own nothing by law, and that it was only just to enslave them, and to kill them when they rebelled.

This, then, was the state of things when Richard Cœur de Lion returned from the Holy Land.

In a narrow street of Nottingham there stood a house apart from the rest.

It was the residence of Edwin Osbert, who followed the craft of an armourer, and it was whispered that in the dead of night many a good sword and great numbers of arrow-heads for Saxon use were forged beneath his house.

Osbert, was a widower left with one child, a daughter, named Hilda. She was seventeen years of age, and helped an old woman, the housekeeper, to look after her father's comforts.

It was a glorious evening in July, when the ful-



ness and beauty of the summer lies upon mead and forest.

Hilda sat at an open window, watching the shadows cast by the quaint houses creeping slowly along as the sun sank slowly towards a bank of amber and purple clouds low down in the western sky.

She wore a gown and kirtle of dark homespun cloth, and her hair, brown and shining, was braided over her high, white forehead, and fell behind in natural and graceful wavelets over her neck and shoulders.

"Elsa," she said, turning to the old housekeeper, who was busying about in the room, "go to the corner of the street and see if my father or Harold are coming."

The old woman hobbled out of the house, and soon returned, shaking her head and mumbling complaints about her master for tarrying so long, and vowing vengeance against Harold Maystone, his apprentice.

"'Tis strange," Hilda murmured, "that my father should leave at mid-day without saying where he was going and remain absent. And what of Harold? My mind misgives me! How lonely I feel! How dark and ominous the sky is getting!"

"Here is that idle losel Harold!" cried the old

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woman, rushing into the street. "How now, Sir Idler—pray, where have you been? By St. Nicholas! your master will teach you to move your feet faster!"

"Peace—Elsa—peace!" Harold Maystone said. "Look to your own business, and leave mine alone."

He was a fine, handsome stripling, about eighteen years of age. His dress consisted of a brown tunic, hose, and well-fitting shoes, and the doffing of his plain, flat cap to his young mistress revealed a well-shaped head furnished with a plentiful stock of crisp, black hair, and firm and determined features.

"'Tis well that you have returned before my father," Hilda said angrily. "Little did I ever dream that you would break your promise to me, since you——"

"Heaven is my witness that I do not deserve your rebuke. I have had that to detain me you little guess of. Your father will not return to this house to-night."

"What mean you, Harold?" Hilda cried, white to the lips.

"Be not alarmed! He is alive and well, but——"

"Thank Heaven for that mercy!" Hilda said, clasping her hands. "But tell me what has befallen him?"

"He has been arrested and thrown into Nottingham Gaol."

"Arrested!" cried the terrified girl. "Arrested! For what crime? Give me my hood; I must haste to see him."

"Be calm, my young mistress," the lad advised, crushing his cap in his hands. "His crime is too common to excite much sympathy among the majority of his neighbours. It is but the crime of helping men of his own race!"

"Alas!" moaned Hilda, "I might have foreboded this."

"What!" Harold Maystone ejaculated. "Do you, his daughter, hold it a crime to assist the poor Saxons with food from his own table. Is it a crime even to furnish them with weapons that they may meet their oppressors on equal terms?"

"No, no!"

"Would that Robin Hood had not left Sherwood Forest!" Harold cried.

"While he and his men were near we had some peace. You remember how the Saxons rose and drove the Normans before them? That was because Robin Hood led them. But now, poor folks, they have lost heart, and the Norman yoke rests heavier than ever on their shoulders."

"But my father! Can nothing be done to effect his release?"

"Nothing at present. He will be brought before the justices to-morrow, and, perchance, if he has sufficient money to satisfy their greedy maws they may let him go free."

"Then we are lost!" Hilda sobbed. "Robbery under the name of taxation has left us poor indeed. We had to part even with my mother's jewels, and we have no more than what you see in this humble house. The wretches! They will murder my father, and leave me to starve! But pray go on, and tell me how you heard of this disaster."

"It was by mere chance," Harold replied. "I was returning by way of the market square, when I saw my good master struggling in the hands of the officers. His accuser was present, Gildron by name, a fellow in the employ of Basil de Vaux, and if I do not give him a broken head before night my name is not Harold Maystone."

"Do nothing rash, good Harold," Hilda rejoined. "Know you aught of Arthur Claxton?"

"What Saxon does not?" said Harold. "He is one of your father's staunchest friends. Mark me, Arthur Claxton is not the man to suffer that Edwin Osbert shall endure the dungeon and fetters of these proud Normans without taking vengeance on them, and that soon."

"Stay, then, until I have donned my hood and veil," Hilda said. "We'll then to the streets to see if Claxton be abroad, and then to the prison."

"I will attend you joyfully," Harold replied. "I will take dagger as well as staff," he added to himself, "for there is no telling what adventures we may encounter."

Hilda hurried from the room to return in a few minutes attired for the expedition; and, giving instructions to

old Elsa to keep the door fast, set out with Harold.

Market had been held that day, and there were still a number of strangers in the town. Some had taken too much drink, and as a natural consequence were brawling and behaving like idiots.

Hilda and Harold avoided the crowd as much as possible, but they were not lucky enough to escape attention.

A well-dressed man, wearing a gold chain about his neck and gilt spurs on his heels, came swaggering along.

"Gildron!" Harold muttered, under his breath. "The man who threw my master into prison. But I must seek the knave some other time to-night. He is a privileged vassal, and will not leave the streets until a late hour. Mistress," he said aloud, "let us turn aside. This is the fellow Gildron I spoke of, and he bears a bad character."

But Gildron, flushed with wine and success at having laid a prominent Saxon by the heels, was not to be denied.

"You walk late, lady," he said, dodging in front of Hilda so that it was impossible for her to pass. "Surely you need a better attendant than this frizzle-headed flatcap."

"I pray you keep out of our way," Harold retorted, suppressing his anger. "This lady needs none of your company."

"I cry your mercy," Gildron sneered. "Doubtless you consider yourself a knightly escort to so fair a charge, but I will see the maiden's face in spite of all you can do."

He advanced and had laid his hand roughly upon the hood which Hilda had drawn closely about her face, when a blow from Harold's staff sent him staggering into the midst of a party of revellers.

"By the bones of the Conqueror, you shall die for this!" Gildron yelled, drawing his sword. "Ho, there, Normans! Down with the knave!"

Three men rushed to the help of Gildron, and although Harold fought bravely, his staff was beaten from his hand, and he was forced to his knees.

"I will have you whipped first and hanged afterwards!" Gildron hissed,

seizing Harold by the throat. "You are a bold springald, and by Plato, you shall receive your full reward!"

"Help! Mercy!" Hilda shrieked.

Harold struggled violently, but he felt that he was fast sinking under the powerful grip of his assailant. Hilda's cry for help maddened him. The miscreants who had come to Gildron's assistance were dragging her away.

"Hold! What may all this mean?" a voice thundered.

These words were accompanied by a blow under Gildron's ear, that caused him to drop like a stone; and Harold, half-throttled and unable to speak, saw before him a stalwart man carrying a thick riding-whip in his left hand.

Hilda's assailants, on seeing Gildron go down like an ox in the shambles, took the hint and fled, leaving the girl half-dead with terror.

"I thank you, sir, whoever you may be," she said. "But pray do not stay, lest you bring trouble on yourself."

"By the mass!" the man replied, "I have gone through so much trouble that a little more will make no difference. I watched this lad; he fought bravely, and had he been left to deal alone with this bully he would have mastered him. What is your name, boy?"

"Harold Maystone, an' it please you."

"It pleases me much," the other replied. "I shall not forget it. Stand aside, and let this burly Norman rise and carry his aching ear homewards."

Gildron was in the act of picking up his sword when the stranger put his foot on it.

"No," said he; "I cannot trust you with so dangerous a toy. I read murder in your eyes. Think yourself lucky that you have not been more harshly treated. I shall give this sword to the lad, who is more worthy to bear it than yourself."

"Have a care," Gildron hissed, putting his hand to the swollen side of his head. "I have the ear of Basil de Vaux."

"My faith!" exclaimed the stranger, laughing. "Methinks I had yours just now. As for Basil de Vaux, a snap of

the fingers for him! I knew his uncle well; indeed, I was not far away from Barnesdale when he met with a very bad accident."

"Perhaps you were one of the villains that assisted in hanging him?" Gildron said, scowling.

"It matters not to you what I am, or who I am," the stalwart man replied, gripping his riding-whip and swinging it to and fro. "As for yourself, you will be well begone before I take a fancy to make both the sides of your head the same size."

"You will hear more of this!" Gildron hissed.

"I expect to. Yes, my swaggering friend, believe me that this will end in something worth talking about. Away, or I'll put the whip across you, and make you dance from end to end of Nottingham and back again!"

Gildron saw the dangerous glitter in the man's eyes, and, assuming a haughty mien he walked away.

"Now a word with you," said the stranger, turning to Hilda and Harold. "I know who you are and what has happened. Go back to your house, and keep within doors until you hear the hooting of an owl. Then open the door without fear."

"Gracious sir," Hilda said, taking his hand and raising it to her lips, "will you now let us know the name of our preserver?"

"Names are dangerous things to give in these days," the stranger replied, smiling. "To tell the truth, I gave mine up long ago and took another. But see!"

As he loosened the collar of his doublet Hilda and Harold saw a flash of green and gold.

"You are——" Harold gasped.

The stranger clapped his hand sharply over the lad's mouth.

"Silence!" he commanded sternly. "Away with you, and learn the value of keeping your lips closed."

For some hundreds of yards Hilda Osbert and Harold Maystone walked without exchanging a word. Harold was silent because he knew the man who had just left them to be no other than the great outlaw, Robin Hood.

His heart bounded with joy at the thought that Robin and his merry men were in the locality again after so long an absence that many Saxons despaired of ever seeing them again.

"Our preserver will come again," Hilda said, as they reached the armourer's house.

"Did he not tell us to listen for the hooting of an owl?" Harold answered. "Then, and then only, we must open the door."

"I understand; you think that the villain who molested us may bring his drunken companions."

"There is no telling," Harold replied. "Get to your room, my sweet young mistress, and be comforted. I am sure we shall have good news ere long."

Meanwhile, what of Edwin Osbert? While darkness was closing in he sat chained to a heavy bench hewn out of a solid piece of oak.

The armourer was a man of strong build, and the muscles of his arms were like knotted cords. He had given the officers some trouble to get him to prison, felling two and nearly throttling another; but now his strength was gone, and, beaten and kicked until he was covered with bruises, he sat with his face buried moodily in his hands, his grey locks trailing over them.

Nottingham prison was of no great extent, being composed principally of strong rooms attached to the western gate, and some low dungeons reserved for the worst of criminals.

A low vaulted room served for the warder, a heavy-browed man of immense proportions, noted for his cruelty, and feared by every unhappy wretch who came in contact with him.

On the night of our story the warder had company—an officer of the guard, a spare, lean man, whose presence in the corner was almost hidden by the huge warder.

"You say true, Master Enrico," the warder was saying. "We have had a busy time, and your men made a good haul this evening. But Osbert will neither eat nor drink. Give me a prisoner who pays well and snaps his fingers at fate. There's Master Sar-

gode, the vintner, for instance. I have had him more than a week, and he sings as merrily as he ever did at his own hostelry, and he will go on singing and feasting as long as his money lasts."

"Ah! He was taken on suspicion of harbouring rebels," said the officer.

"Suspicion," growled the warder. "By St. Nicholas! it was proved up to the hilt, but since Oswald de Burgh died with a halter about his neck the justices are rather chary to convict a man."

"Perchance they are thinking of their own necks," laughed the officer. "They seldom question your actions, though. Well, what will become of Osbert when his money is all gone?"

"Why, he will go too," replied the warder, with a hoarse laugh.

"What! out of prison?"

"How innocent you are, or pretend to be," growled the warder. "No, Enrico, once you catch a troublesome Saxon there is no wisdom in letting him go. Yet go he will," pointing with a huge finger to the floor. "He will go where there is nothing to pay for his keep or lodgings. You understand, I warrant me. But let us visit the bird, whose wings are so nearly clipped. I like not Osbert's silence, and we must find a way to loosen his tongue."

The warder took down a heavy bunch of keys and a lantern from the wall, and, followed by the officer, descended a short flight of stone steps, stopping at length before a low, arched door.

"I put the heaviest and rustiest set of irons on him," the warder said. "I know those irons; they gall the flesh and bring blood if a prisoner moves too freely. Ho, there, you dungeon dog of a Saxon!" he shouted, as he flung open the door. "Have you lost your tongue and cheated the executioner?"

Edwin Osbert lowered his hands from before his face and looked up.

"You are in good company, I see," he replied sneeringly. "Whenever there is misery for a Saxon, there the herring-ribbed Enrico is sure to be."

"Hear you the villain!" Enrico cried, placing his hand on his sword. "It would be only just to strike him dead."

"Patience, good Enrico, patience," chided the warder. "Let him wag his tongue as he will; I trow that he will change his tune when he looks through the hangman's noose."

"Not for such scum as you," Osbert retorted. "Bring me a drink of water and begone."

"Water is so scarce in Nottingham just now that it must be paid for," the warder said, grinning.

This so tickled Enrico that he burst out laughing just as someone came swaggering into the warder's lodge and pounded his fist heavily on the table.

"That is Master Gildron," the warder said. "He has a way of tapping which there is no mistaking. This way, sir; this way. Come and see how your bird takes to his cage."

With the fumes of strong drink in his head, and his heart burning with rage, Gildron leaped down the stone steps and entered the dungeon.

"Rascal!" he said, striking Osbert on the head, "I have news for you. I have an order from the justices to convey you to the castle at daybreak. There you will be tried, and then you will doubtless die the death you deserve. And listen, Saxon wretch! Owing to your brat of a 'prentice boy, I have been struck to the earth, but I'll have revenge."

Edwin Osbert laughed softly.

"Would that I had been there to see. But how did it happen? Harold is not the lad to interfere with anyone unless under great provocation."

"I did but ask to see your daughter's pretty face," Gildron hissed. "The whelp struck me, and I would have throttled him but for a fellow who took his part. Yes, I'll have revenge. I'll have the boy flogged and branded, and I'll claim your daughter as my slave."

"Oh, Heaven!" Osbert cried piteously, "grant that she may die first."

"Ho, ho!" roared the warder; "I thought we should soon hear him whine."

"Put more chains on him," Gildron ordered savagely. "I'll to bed now, and return at four in the morning to take him to the castle."

"That sounds rather strange to me,"

Enrico said. "Has a sheriff been appointed in the place of Oswald de Burgh?"

"What! you question me!" Gildron shrieked. "You! a paltry officer of the guard, dare to interfere! By Mars! you shall answer for this to Basil de Vaux, and it will be odd to me if he does not take a fancy to your ears. Out! out! or you shall keep Osbert company and travel with him to the castle."

This outburst staggered Enrico and filled him with alarm. He knew Gildron to be an upstart and an arrant coward when tackled, but he had found favour with Basil de Vaux and was therefore powerful.

"Your pardon, sir," he said humbly. "I was in hopes that Basil de Vaux had received the honour conferred on his uncle."

"Trust me," replied Gildron. "Basil de Vaux will hold himself answerable to the king for everything he does. Stand out of my way, ignominious lacquey. Yet stay! You shall walk at my heels like a dog through Nottingham. Take my gloves and carry them so that all may see Enrico doing the work of a bondsman."

Enrico made no reply, but bit his nether lip.

"Wait until I get a chance, and then I'll be even with you," he muttered.

CHAPTER 2.

The Hooting of the Owl.

It was the custom in summer time to toll the curfew-bell at nine o'clock, and then lights disappeared from the windows, and the town was left to darkness and slumber.

There was gloom and silence at the armourer's house. The old house-keeper had gone to bed soon after sundown, and Hilda sat in the darkened room, while Harold paced up and down the forge at the back of the house.

Nine o'clock came. The sonorous tongue of the great bell high up in the church tower gave forth its warning notes, and such people who were abroad hurried homewards lest the guard should pounce upon them.

And soon they came with bill and halberd, tramping heavily through the streets, Enrico leading the way, and shouting at every corner:

"The curfew has tolled! Put out fire and candle! Put out your fire!"

"Who goes there?" he demanded suddenly, as a shadowy figure approached.

"A father of the church," came the solemn reply. "Benedicite!"

Enrico doffed his steel cap and stood on one side to let the friar pass.

"It is late for a good father of the monastery to be abroad," he said.

"Ay, my son, it is; but when duty calls we must obey. Good-night, and peace be with you!"

The guard saluted, standing still until the friar had passed out of sight; but no sooner had they gone than the holy man returned, and throwing his cowl back upon his shoulders, revealed the genial features of Friar Tuck.

"Good luck," said he, puffing out his cheeks and leaning heavily on his staff. "I did not expect to meet them here. It is a wonder that that long slab of destruction did not insist on seeing the abbot's order, which no friar goes without after dark. Too-whit, too-whoo!"

It was the signal agreed upon, and in an instant the door of the armourer's house opened gently.

"Daughter," said Friar Tuck as Hilda's troubled face showed in the gloom, "fear nothing; I am your friend."

"But you are not the man who saved me from insult," Hilda said.

"No; he is coming, and others with him. See, here they are."

Robin Hood, Little John, and Will Scarlet appeared as suddenly as if they had sprung from the earth. Hilda closed the door as soon as they had passed within, and Harold came running into the room.

"This way, sirs!" he said. "I will take you to a secret room used by my master when he feared that the Normans were too busy."

Passing to an underground chamber, Harold kindled a torch and held it on high.

"We can speak freely now," said

Robin Hood. "I am the King of Sherwood Forest, and knowing that Edwin Osbert has struck many a blow in the Saxon cause, I have sworn to liberate him, or leave my dead body in the streets of Nottingham!"

"And I—and I," cried Little John and Will Scarlet.

"Being a man of peace," Friar Tuck put in, "I will remain outside the gate; but should anyone chance to pass by while these children teach the warder a new game, I fear me much that he will go home with a broken head."

"You, friar, must contrive to get the gate open for us," Robin Hood said. "Old Swartz, the warder, would surely not open it to a stranger or citizen for the weight of his head in gold."

"I'll parley with him," Friar Tuck replied. "He has many sins, I trow, and I'll find a story that will gain me admission."

"Boy," said Robin Hood, turning to Harold, "as soon as we are within the gate you will take your young mistress through and obey the man whom you will see waiting. Now give me some files and a pair of pincers, and then we will go. But softly, softly, for these Normans are as cunning as rats."

Friar Tuck went first, the rest following some paces from each other, halting now and then when Robin Hood held up his hand.

The wind was blowing, causing strange and mysterious noises. The rattling of wooden shutters sounded like the hurrying of feet, and more than once Robin Hood thought that their presence had been discovered.

It was a relief to him when the gate loomed out of the darkness.

Friar Tuck advanced boldly and struck his staff on the iron bars of a wicket made for the warder to peer through. Swartz, the warder, heard the sound, and started violently.

"Who can it be at such a time?" he muttered, taking a heavy sword from a corner. "How now?" he demanded as he threw open the wicket. "Who are you? Ha! a friar, I see. What brings you from the monastery at such a time of night?"

"Your welfare," Friar Tuck replied, in a deep tone of voice.

"My welfare!" Swartz repeated with a gasp. "I see; someone has told you certain things about me. By St. Paul! even if they were true, this is neither the time nor place for confession. Go back to your cell, father, and I'll come to you when I see fit."

"My son, I cannot rest until I have spoken with you," Friar Tuck replied. "I have heard nothing of you, but I had a dream——"

"Dream!" Swartz interrupted, his teeth chattering in his head.

"Dream, vision, call it what you will," Friar Tuck continued. "I thought I saw you lying dead on the floor of your lodge, so I came, as was my right and duty."

"Heaven help me! I, too, have had strange and ugly dreams. Come in, father, and comfort me."

The wicket closed, and presently the great gate swung open; then, to the warder's astonishment and dismay, a huge fist crashed between his eyes, and the next moment little John had him by the throat.

"Into the lodge with him," said Robin Hood, "and gag him, for if he should get his mouth open he will bring half Nottingham here."

"Spare me!" moaned Swartz hoarsely. "I swear by the saints that I will not utter a single cry!"

"I'll not trust you," Robin Hood said. "Gag him! And now you, Hilda and Harold, quick through the other gate. Ned Carter! Hillo, boy—hillo!"

"I am here!" cried a voice. "All is ready, chief."

"To the forest, then, with this maiden and lad. Wait not for me, but go straight on."

Turning abruptly away, Robin Hood followed Little John and Swartz into the lodge, while Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet remained behind to secure the gates.

"It was well and quickly done," Friar Tuck said, "but I did not expect to trap him so easily."

"Now for the keys," said Robin Hood when the friar and Will Scarlet rejoined him. "Will, go forward with the

lantern while Little John and I bring the warder along. Exchange is no robbery, so he shall take Osbert's place."

Osbert had fallen into a kind of stupor, and when roused opened his eyes slowly.

"So soon!" he said, thinking Gildron had come to take him to the castle. "It cannot be light yet. But what does it matter? The sooner it is over the better."

"Exactly," laughed Robin Hood, filing away at the fetters. "I am Robin Hood, and have come to take you with me to Sherwood Forest."

"Can it be true?" Osbert cried. "But my daughter? What will become of her?"

"She is already on her way there with one of my trusty followers," Robin Hood replied.

"Heaven bless you for this!" Osbert said. "For myself I cared but little, but I trembled when I thought of Hilda being left to the mercy of such wretches as rule us."

At this moment the fetters fell from the prisoner's limbs with a clang, and rising Osbert walked stiffly towards the open door.

"Bear up awhile," Robin Hood said, seeing how weak he was. "You shall ride soon—ay, and sleep, too, amid as sweet a bundle of hay as ever came from a meadow. Now for the other prisoner, Sargode. It would be cruel, indeed, to leave him in the lurch after he has done so much for us in the past."

The vintner was overjoyed when Little John, having found the key to his dungeon, flung the door open.

"Joy! Joy!" exclaimed the delighted man. "Only give me my liberty, and let me die!"

"There's time enough for you to die yet," Friar Tuck said. "Sit still, good friend, while we take these ugly bits of iron off. You are a vintner by trade; what an awful change from your cellar to this dog-hole! There, there! you are free now. Come, follow—follow! Robin Hood is calling, and time presses."

Swartz was like a man oppressed by a hideous spell when they had left him in the dungeon. Bound, gagged, and helpless he lay, trembling at every

sound, and praying that the night would come to an end.

At length a dull stupor overcame him, and he fell asleep. The sound of horses' hoofs and the jingle of arms woke him. Gildron and an escort had come for Edwin Osbert.

Floundering heavily from his horse, Gildron hammered at the gate with the hilt of his sword.

"What ails this dunderheaded loon, Swartz!" he said after knocking twice. "I can get no answer. Ho, there, keeper of the gates. Ho, there, Swartz!"

The warder struggled hard with his bonds, and went half-mad as these words fell upon his ears. The knots tightened as he writhed and twisted, causing him dreadful pain.

"There's a window over the gate," said one of the escort. "Why not send for a ladder and enter? Dead or alive, Swartz is deaf to sound."

Gildron had given no thought to the barred aperture which did duty for a window; but seizing on the idea at once, he sent some of his men for a ladder, and no sooner was it planted against the wall than he ran up it.

"An axe here," he said. "I'll not stand on trifles on such an occasion as this. The Saxons are well able to pay for a few iron bars and pieces of stone."

Filled with uncontrollable rage, he attacked the bars like a demon, splintering them, and sending the fragments in all directions.

Then drawing his sword, he scrambled through the hole, calling to his men to follow him.

"Swartz—Swartz! Where are you?" shouted Gildron as he rushed down the stairs.

Into the lodge he went, and out of it, and down to the dungeon in which he had left Osbert.

He could scarcely believe his eyes when he found the bound and gagged warder in the place where his prisoner should have been. In his mad fury he raised his sword to strike.

"Hold, sir!" said one of his men. "It will be only fair to let Swartz speak. This is no act of treachery; he has not connived at being overcome and bound. See how the poor brute is suffering!"

Gildron tore the gag from the warder's mouth.

"Speak now!" he cried. "Tell me how men could walk through barred gates, how liberate prisoners and bind you! Speak—speak!"

"For the love of mercy, bear with me!" Swartz groaned. "I am as innocent as an unborn babe of doing wrong. A friar, under pretence, gained admission, and Robin Hood and some of his villains set upon me, and left me in this miserable condition."

"You lie!" Gildron exclaimed.

"It is as true as that you and I must die some day," Swartz replied. "Go to Osbert's house, and you will find neither his daughter nor Harold the 'prentice. Robin Hood has sent them to his haunt in Sherwood Forest."

"Death and destruction! I'll after him!" Gildron cried. "I must have more men! It is not yet time for Enrico and the watch to have gone to their homes. Send for them! Bring horses! Ho, there! Rouse the city! Call every true Norman to arms against the outlaw!"

Forth went the summons, but few indeed were the responses, and they were none too hearty. The Norman citizens preferred the security of their own homes to hunting in a dense forest for Robin Hood, whose very name was sufficient to strike terror into their hearts. So for the most part they contented themselves with rushing up and down the streets, shouting:

"Enrico! Enrico!"

And soon came the lean captain of the watch, with his tired men trailing at his heels.

"Enrico," Gildron said, "harsh words passed from my lips to you last night. Forget them, for we have a common cause now. Robin Hood has liberated the prisoners and taken flight into the forest. We will follow him."

Enrico scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"How many men did he have?" he asked.

"Not half a dozen, I'll swear," Swartz said.

"In that case I am with you," Enrico replied.

Amid a great clatter and shouting, horses were brought for Enrico and such of his men as could ride well, and away they went, Gildron waving his sword, and vowing that the people should soon see Robin Hood's head stuck on a pole.

CHAPTER 3.

The Stranger Knight.

NEVER for one moment did Gildron doubt that he had Robin Hood within his grasp. His knowledge of the forest was extensive, and some time before he had volunteered to stake his life against the capture of Robin Hood, if Basil de Vaux and the authorities of Nottingham would place him at the head of the trained bands.

This was taken as a vain boast in consequence of Robin Hood having disappeared from the locality; but now Gildron's chance had come, for he was attended by some of the best men from Nottingham Castle.

Ten thousand crowns was the price set upon Robin Hood's head. Already Gildron saw its glitter.

"You will act fairly with me," Enrico said, galloping his horse to his leader's side. "I am acting with you as a free-lance, and shall expect my share of the reward."

"I will fill your purse twice to bursting," Gildron replied.

Enrico's greedy eyes flashed, for his purse was a large one; but he soon had other things to occupy his mind.

By which road had Robin Hood entered the forest? This was a question which soon resolved itself into a puzzle.

No one had seen him go; no one had seen anything more suspicious than a great load of hay, driven by an innocent-looking youth with a cap three sizes too large for him.

But Gildron would not be denied. Throwing out his men so that the line commanded the best part of a mile, he kept steadily on.

At length he came to a farmhouse owned by a Saxon. At the gate leading to the house stood a load of hay. No doubt it was the identical one spoken of, for there, too, was the innocent-look-

ing youth, with a cap that flapped over his nose and the back of his neck.

Gildron rode up and thrust his sword a dozen times into the hay.

"What be that for, gracious sir?" demanded the boy, with a stupid grin.

"That is my business," Gildron said. "Peace, or perchance you will get a taste of the blade yourself."

"That be what the man said when I inquired the time," the boy remarked.

"Man! What man?"

"How should I know? He was in front of six or seven others, and they were riding as if they were trying to break their necks."

"Ha! You are not quite such a fool as you look, although the corners of your mouth do join your ears," Gildron said. "Which way did these men go?"

"Which way?" repeated the youth, thrusting his sun-browned hand under his cap and rubbing his head. "Why, when they saw me they turned aside, instead of riding straight on."

"May the fiend seize this idiot!" Gildron exclaimed, crimson with fury. "Where did they turn aside? Speak out, ass, or I'll cut your speech short for ever!"

The boy looked up at the sun, and then turned slowly round and extended his left arm.

"They went that way," he said.

"But there is no path in that direction," Gildron said. "There is nothing but copse and thicket."

"Natheless, they went that way," the boy declared stoutly. "The men I speak of seemed as if they could ride anywhere and over anything. La! how the horses jumped! The men only just spoke to them, and up they went like witches on broomsticks."

Gildron waited to hear no more, but dashed into the thicket, shouting in stentorian tones for his troopers to follow.

Then the innocent-looking youth indulged in a wide grin, and burying his face amid the hay so as to drown the sound of his voice he laughed until his sides shook.

"I knew I should put them on the wrong track," he said. "Ha, ha! the've gone to the left, and Robin

Hood went to the right; yet methinks it will not be long before he sends some of his archers to see how the Normans are faring."

Then, satisfied that the pursuers were out of sight, the lad took two gold nobles from the depths of his wallet and tossed them joyously into the air.

"Robin Hood's the man to work for," he said. "May he live until there isn't a Norman in the land!"

Gildron pushed on with all possible speed, and Enrico kept as close to him as possible. The captain of the guard did not intend to lose sight of the swaggering Norman, whose insulting words still rankled in Enrico's breast.

One by one the men dropped out of sight and hearing. Their horses were not used to such work, and floundered miserably along, some falling, others refusing to stir in spite of spur and galling bit.

Gildron, however, was splendidly mounted, and Enrico also had the good luck to find himself on a thoroughbred horse, full of fire and stamina.

But at last these powerful animals began to flag, and then Gildron, pulling up, put a horn to his lips and sounded it shrilly.

"We have outpaced the men, Enrico," he said. "The laggards deserve flogging, but I suppose I must find some excuse for them."

He sounded the horn again, and yet again, without receiving any answer.

"The varlets have stopped on their own account," Gildron cried, shaking his mailed fist in the air. "Where are your ears that you failed to notice that they were not following?"

"My faith, I might ask you the same question, and with better reason," Enrico answered. "Who is in command—you or I?"

Gildron frowned, and then noticing that his horse had gone lame he dismounted.

"See what ails my charger," he commanded the officer of the guard. "Methinks he has picked up a stone with his shoe."

Enrico paid no attention, but turning aside, whistled softly to himself. Gildron grew furious.

"I am your superior——" he began, when Enrico suddenly faced him with blazing eyes and his lips quivering with rage.

"Insolent cur and time-server!" he hissed. "Last night you made my blood boil, and, by heavens! I'll not stand it. Beg my pardon, or I'll thrash you like a disobedient hound!"

Gildron recoiled on his heels.

"You are mad," he said—"yes, mad, to address me in such terms!"

"Mad or not, I'll be revenged for the ignominy you heaped on my head before that drunken warder," Enrico said. "Draw and defend your life."

The captain of the guard's sword flashed from its sheath as he spoke, and he looked so dangerous that Gildron sought to pacify him.

"Keep your anger for some more fitting time," he said. "Have you forgotten the mission what brought us here? Have you forgotten that the capture of Robin Hood means wealth and station to both of us?"

"I have forgotten nothing," Enrico cried passionately. "Defend yourself, or I will drive my sword through you."

Gildron retreated to a tree and thrust his back firmly against it. He drew his sword and slashed and hacked at his infuriated antagonist. Enrico had all the advantage, and he was in the act of passing his blade under Gildron's guard when a man rushed between them.

"Not so fast," he said. "Not so fast, worthy Normans. Tell me the nature of the quarrel, and if I think it be a fair one, I'll act as judge."

"Who are you to interfere?" Enrico demanded.

For answer the man put a whistle to his lips; and at the first sound from it a score of men in Lincoln green, with arrows fitted to the strings of their bows, leaped out of the brushwood.

"I am Much the Miller's son," said the young man who had first come upon the scene. "Robin Hood, the King of Sherwood Forest, having reached one of his retreats safely, sent us to see if we could be of any service to the gentlemen who are so anxious to make his acquaintance."

Enrico threw down his sword, but Gildron stood shaking and trembling against the tree.

"We are your prisoners," Enrico said. "Well, it is no crime to surrender against such odds."

"None whatever," Much the Miller's son replied, raising his cap. "You have acted like a man, and you have my permission to go free, but Gildron, master of Basil de Vaux's horse, must consider himself a prisoner."

"For that matter," Enrico said, "I may as well go with him. I care not what becomes of me as long as I see that knave hanged."

"Your wish will probably be gratified," Much the Miller's son told him. "Now, men, bring these fellows along on foot. Their horses may be brought on presently, or perhaps it would be just as well to turn them adrift, as we have more cattle on our hands now than we can properly find room for."

All this was gall and wormwood to Gildron.

"I am of noble birth," he declared, "and I hope you will not put me to the shame of being bound."

"If you put poor men in fetters that cut and fester the flesh, you cannot object to cords," Much the Miller's son responded sternly. "Place your hands behind your back."

"You are strong in numbers now," Gildron hissed. "But my time will come!"

"You had need be quick about it, then," Much the Miller's son replied. "Robin Hood is waiting to tell you the tale of Osbert, the armourer, afresh. Were I you, I should lose no time in making my peace."

"You mean that the outlaw will add another murder to the many he has been guilty of?"

"That is a lie so often repeated that it is not worth denying," Much the Miller's son said. "Forward, there! Captain Enrico, give me your word that you will not attempt to escape, and you shall go unbound."

"My faith! I would not run away were you to give me leave," Enrico replied. "I am dying to see the end of this."

"But what if the end should be in your own dying?"

Enrico shrugged his shoulders.

"Something has made a changed man of me," he replied. "I was a coward, but I am a coward no longer. I own to treating Osbert badly, and if it be any satisfaction to him, he can take vengeance on me with his own hand."

"There is something noble in this rascal, after all," though Much the Miller's son as the party moved away.

Suddenly copse and thicket vanished, and they found themselves in a winding path. This again gave place to a long stretch of dark firs, with here and there a few larches with delicate green, wide-spreading branches and spire-like tops tapering, as it were, to the very sky.

After deep and dark forest land came a glade, shut in with oaks so close together that at the first glance they seemed to form four walls round a beautiful, daisy-studded carpet.

And here, seated on a kind of dais, was Robin Hood, the King of Sherwood Forest, and at his side Maid Marian, clad in crimson velvet and cloth of gold.

The outlaw was resplendent in a Lincoln green tunic, hunting belt beautifully embroidered, fawn-coloured hat, and soft boots that reached high above his knees.

All around were gathered Osbert the Armourer, Hilda, Harold Maystone, Sargode, the vintner, and many others who owed their lives and freedom to Robin Hood.

The back of this imposing picture consisted of a number of archers, erect, silent, holding their bows in their left hands and resting their right hands lightly on their lips.

The sight almost deprived Gildron of breath. Was this the freebooter, the wild savage of a man he had heard talked about? Surely such a face as Robin Hood's, and such natural grace as his, were never possessed by a common poacher and deerslayer?

"I knew that Much the Miller's son would not fail me," said Robin, waving his hand gaily to his faithful followers. "Yet I fear you are disappointed at catching your game with so little

trouble. I have sent a few beaters to rouse the rest out of the thicket into which they so stupidly got tangled, and I doubt not but that they have winged their way gladly back to Nottingham by this time. So, ho, Gildron! you have come to see me at last, and you, too, my brave Captain Enrico!"

"I came against my will," Gildron replied surlily.

"So I see," Robin responded. "So I see, or you would carry your hands at your sides. The gallant captain has required no ornaments to his wrists, I observe. Well, sirs, you are welcome to the most beautiful part of the forest, which, in honour of my sweetheart, I have called 'Maid Marian's Bower.' To-day we make merry; to-morrow we shall be in a business mood, and methinks there may be far more tears than mirth."

"If you are in the spirit to mock a defenceless man, you have an excellent opportunity," Gildron said.

"The old story," Robin Hood said, turning to Maid Marian. "The tyrants always rail at what they deem an indignity, but only when it happens to touch them. But be our prisoner lord, henchman, mountebank, or lacquey, he shall not go hungry. Ho, there! Where is our great trencherman, Little John, and our best of cellarers, Friar Tuck?"

"A truce to this mummary," Gildron hissed, between his teeth. "Here is a beggar with manners aping the airs of a king. And, forsooth, he calls himself king and holds his court like one. I'd never believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes."

"You are cousin to Basil de Vaux, I believe," said Robin Hood, turning blandly towards him.

"I have that honour."

"If it be an honour to be related to a libertine, it is yours," Robin Hood rejoined. "Ho, there! unbind his hands, and see that he is well supplied with food and drink."

Just then Little John appeared from amid the stately oaks, with Friar Tuck trotting after him.

"News! News!" cried Little John. "A knight clad in shining steel, and mounted on a spotless white horse, with

gold and silver trappings, rides this way!"

"Alone?" cried Robin Hood, in astonishment.

"He is as much alone as a love-sick girl breathing the story of her woes to the stars at midnight," Little John replied.

"There is some mystery here," Robin Hood said, rising. "What of his arms and bearings?"

"He carries sword and battle-axe, but there is no device on his shield."

"And has he spoken?"

"He asked a man of peace where he could obtain a meal," Friar Tuck said. "I bade him come hither, and, lo! he comes, attended by Dick Driver."

The stranger knight dismounted and, without raising the vizor of his helmet, said:

"This is some time-honoured country feast or revel, I suppose?"

"It is our custom when good work has been done," Robin Hood replied. "But your guise is so unusual that I must question you. What is your name and quality?"

"I am known by several names, as you may be," was the reply.

"That is true enough," said Robin Hood. "I am called thief, outcast, murderer, and other names quite as untruthful. I'll confess to one thing—I am what misfortune and oppression made me. I am an outlaw; so, Sir Knight, judging that you are a man of means, you will not object to pay toll."

"By my sword and shield, you are Robin Hood!" cried the stranger knight.

"Surely it did not take a wise head to tell that," the outlaw replied. "Yes, I am Robin Hood, and so proud am I at being so called that I would not part with my name for all the jewels in the king's crown!"

"That might make the king envious," rejoined the knight. "But wait! Who are these two men?"

"They are prisoners; but I shall not deal with them until to-morrow."

"By the mass, you carry matters with a high hand! You ask me to pay toll, meaning that I must pay my way. I

must go hungry, for I have not a single groat to bless myself with."

"If that be so, you shall be none the less welcome," Robin Hood replied. "But this magnificent armour! Your superb charger!"

"An Arab steed of pure breed. It is the gift of a friend."

"By our lady," said Robin Hood, "I'll know who you are before we dine!"

"Shall I dine for nothing?"

"As I live, you shall!"

"And you will not steal my horse?"

"Nay! Some of my own men shall see you safely out of the forest."

"I am your king!"

As he spoke the knight threw up his vizor, revealing the handsome features of Richard Cœur de Lion.

For the space of five seconds all around were too astounded to utter a word. But then, as Robin Hood leapt to his feet and waved his hat about his head, there went up such a mighty cheer from the foresters that the very trees seemed to shake at their roots.

"St. Anthony is good to us," Friar Tuck said as the tumult ceased. "Richard of England shall now see how we really live."

"By my sceptre, I wish I always fared as well!" Richard said, smiling as a huge dish of delicious venison was placed before him.

"Eat well of it now, for it is your own," Robin Hood replied, laughing. "Your majesty has taken me by surprise, otherwise I would have spread a feast worthy of the occasion."

"I am more satisfied to eat of my own venison here than in my palace," said the king, laughing too. "Robin Hood, I will speak to you anon, but I would fain have you come to my Court, and there address me in the presence of my barons. To-day I'll be content with having the histories of these good people gathered so cheerfully about me."

"Like me, there is not one that has not suffered some wrong," Robin Hood said gloomily.

"From all I hear you have taken harsh means to redress those wrongs."

"When laws are made to uphold the

rich and crush the poor, it is time that someone takes arms against such tyranny. Richard of England, you loved your kingly sire, and mourned for him when he died. Tell me, what would you have done had your sire been murdered and hanged over the door of his house?"

"By my sword, I would have had a rare revenge on every man who had thought or act in the deed."

"Such was my case, then," Robin Hood told the king. "My father perished miserably for doing nothing more than asserting his rights as a free-born man. I vowed to avenge his death, and I did."

"And you were not to blame, but you have visited rather heavily," said Richard.

"I vow I have never taken from or interfered with anyone but the tyrant and the oppressor," Robin replied.

"Humph!" muttered the king. "That appears a question too deep and broad to be discussed."

"Look around you, Richard of England," Robin Hood continued. "Here are men, women, and children. There is not one among them but has some sad story to tell of dear ones slain before their eyes, of houses burnt to the ground, and of such cruelties as even beasts of the field would not be guilty of, committed in the name of the law."

"You tell me strange things," the king said. "Have you a recent case?"

"Ay, and that accounts for these two men sitting apart," Robin Hood replied, pointing to the prisoners. "Edwin Osbert, armourer of Nottingham, rise and tell the king what has happened since last sundown."

"We'll finish our dinner first," the king said. "Then accuser and accused shall stand face to face, and I'll judge between them. Ha! Robin Hood, your wine is even better than the venison. Whence comes it?"

"You had better question Friar Tuck as to that," Robin Hood replied.

"Will this friar answer me the question?"

"Your Majesty," said Friar Tuck, looking straight up at the sky, "the

making of wine is an art. It is the juice of the grape, and——"

"Yes, yes," cried the king, "I have heard all that before, but I want to know what cellar this wine comes from."

"That, I fear, is a secret," Friar Tuck replied.

The foresters roared with laughter, and Richard joined in heartily.

"Robin Hood," he said, "I command you to attend us in London. This ring I now give you will pass you unmolested along the road; and be advised by me, bring no men in your train, lest you arouse suspicion. Come in your guise as forester, and, if nothing more, I'll promise you a welcome and safe passage back."

"Even if the evidence of the nobles go against me?" Robin Hood inquired naively. "Trust me, Richard the Lion-Hearted. I have ever been loyal to you, and taken nothing more from this forest than belongs to a Saxon. We have our rights here, and poor enough rights, too, considering that the Saxon franklins have blood almost as noble as your own flowing in their veins—men driven from rich pasture-lands, to live as they could in the woods and forests."

"You speak boldly," the king said, bending his brows.

"I am not the man to mince my words," Robin Hood replied. "You have heard me condemned as one unworthy to live. Richard of England, strange stories of your doings in the Holy Land found their way to England, and had we believed them we had held you in the light of a monster."

"Ha! Whence came those stories?"

"Ask the men who will fawn upon you when you walk between them on the way to your throne."

King Richard bit his lips. He knew that Robin Hood had spoken the truth, and his heart rankled with anger against the treacherous band who, having sought his downfall, were now ready to kiss the dust from his feet.

"Your sweetheart, Maid Marian, should sing well," he said, after a pause. "I will listen to her lay, and then depart, holding you to your promise."

"I will keep it, bringing but this lad," placing his hand on Harold May-

stone's head, "with me to act as my esquire."

Taking a lute in her hand, Maid Marian sang a song of two verses in a soft, rich voice.

"By the saints!" exclaimed the king when she ceased singing, "those words were composed and sung by my own minstrel, Blondel. Has he, too, paid a visit to Robin Hood?"

"Nay, royal sir. I learnt them from Sir Eustace Alleyne, whom Robin Hood befriended."

"I remember hearing of the circumstance," the king said. "In good sooth, I find myself in strange company, and must tarry yet a while, for I would hear what Osbert the Armourer has to say."

The tale was soon told, and King Richard turned angrily on Gildron and Enrico.

"Now, by Heaven!" he cried, in a voice like rolling thunder, "Osbert the Armourer shall decide your fate."

"May it please you, sire," put in the armourer, stepping forward, "I claim the ordeal of battle."

"Right nobly said," Richard cried. "No fairer offer could be made. Ho, Robin Hood, let all the tender-hearted depart while these men fight. Heaven defend the right, although as to that no doubt exists in my mind."

In a few moments the glade was cleared of all the ladies, and Osbert, sword in hand, faced Enrico.

"Strike, and strike hard!" the king shouted. "This is to be no child's play! St. George for England! Love of ladies! Fight for valour's sake, and let the best man win!"

Both were skilled swordsmen, and did their best before the king. It was, in fact, a grand display of marvellous churning and parrying, and for quite ten minutes neither could claim the advantage.

Suddenly Osbert and Enrico lowered the points of their swords and looked into each other's eyes.

"I bear you not half the grudge as I do to that villain Gildron," Osbert said. "Enrico, I shall beat you in the end, but I will not kill you if I can help it."

"Do your best, as I intend to do," Enrico replied.

"What means all this talking?" cried the king. "Time presses, and I must away. By the plains of Palestine! if you end not this affair, and quickly, too, I will draw sword upon you myself."

Again the combatants attacked each other, and soon there came a gasping cry as Enrico fell forward heavily.

"I would have spared him, but he did not care to live," Osbert muttered. "Your majesty, and Robin Hood, I am ready to uphold my rights against——"

"The Evil One is in this!" came the voice of Friar Tuck in a mighty shout. "Gildron has slipped away!"

Such was the case. So intent had all been on Osbert and Enrico's display of swordsmanship that no heed had been paid to Gildron, and choosing an exciting moment he had slipped away and dashed into the forest.

"Well," said the king, "I can almost forgive him for using his legs so smartly. Look not so glum, Robin Hood; I will deal with him and others ere long. Come, sir, I thank you for your splendid entertainment, and await your escort. Twilight will soon be gathering, and I may miss the path."

CHAPTER 4.

Robin at the Mercy of Foes.

THE sun was settling down over the curious little town then named St. Benet's, and church-bells were tinkling as Robin Hood and Harold Maystone rode through the long, straggling street on their way to wait upon the king, as Richard had commanded them to do.

"You are tired, lad," the outlaw said; "perhaps I was too hasty when I said you should accompany me, though you pleaded hard to be allowed to do so. But take courage. In three days' time at the latest we shall see London town and be lodged in King Richard's palace. No harm has come to us, no harsh words uttered, for the king's ring has acted as a talisman."

"Yet there have been ugly looks enough, although you have given no man your name. My faith, though, it would seem that every Norman in the land knows you."

"A good many do," Robin Hood replied, smiling. "It is my doublet of Lincoln green that makes them suspect that I am from Sherwood Forest; but now Richard is home again there is not a tyrant from John o' Groats to Land's End but trembles at the thought of the vengeance the Lion-Hearted King will take on those who have betrayed his faith.

"But will he do it?" Harold demanded.

"Will he do it!" Robin Hood repeated in amazement. "Why, lad, what think you caused him to command me to attend him? Not to shut me in a dungeon?"

"Nay, but these nobles and barons are men of plausible tongues as well as of great power," Harold replied. "Now that the Crusade is over, and so many good men left in the Holy Land, Richard would find himself in a fix if the Norman nobility turned their backs upon him in time of war."

"You put what Maid Marian said into my mind," Robin Hood rejoined, thoughtfully. "Tush! I will have none of it! Richard has the people with him, and though they may grumble they must give way. Now, where shall we lodge? Here is a comfortable-looking hostelry, so just summon the host, and tell him that two travellers were never so hungry or thirsty."

Some distance ahead of them loomed a huge castle perched on a hill. Men were pacing up and down the outer walls, but the gates were opened and the drawbridge lowered.

"I know not who lives yonder, but we will soon find out," Robin said, as they rode under the great wooden archway of the inn. "Call the host, Harold, and bid the ostler attend to our steeds, for they stand in as much need of food and rest as ourselves."

In answer to Harold's shout a strange-looking man came to the door. He was slightly humpbacked, thick-set, bullet-headed, and closely shaven. His arms were too long and his legs were too short for his body, and he was anything but pleasant to gaze upon.

As he stood with his hands resting on his hips, and his legs wide apart, he

eyed Robin Hood none too favourably as he said:

"That is a fine ring on your finger I am Peter Matherson, at your service, and I hope to do you justice while you honour my inn with your presence."

"That will be for one night only," Robin Hood replied. "Call your ostler and tell him to use our horses well. My faith! how weary I am. I could sleep as well on these cobble stones as on a bed of down. But we'll eat first and sleep afterwards."

The ostler proved to be as ugly as Peter Matherson, but Robin Hood, knowing by experience that good looks were not always signs of honesty and good fellowship, took no notice, but passed into the building, followed by Harold.

A sharp-featured dame ushered them into a shadowy room, where, it seemed, the sun never came, for the atmosphere was damp and earthy.

"Humph! I wish I had stopped ten miles lower down the road," Robin Hood said. "Never mind, Harold; we are like beggars, and must be thankful for any shelter. To-morrow, I trow, we shall be lodged differently."

Peter Matherson attended to the spreading of the table himself. He placed on it a huge round of beef, a capon, a great crusty loaf, and a bottle of wine.

"What nobleman lives in yonder castle?" Robin Hood asked, as the inn-keeper still hovered about the table.

"Baron Hazeldeane," the latter replied. "He has been to Nottingham, a place you may know of, and is expected back this very evening."

"Why think you that I should be acquainted with Nottingham?" Robin Hood demanded.

"Because there is a castle there, and in it once lived the sheriff, Oswald de Burgh."

"That is news; but how should it concern me?"

"I took you to be a Saxon forester," Matherson replied, with his eyes fixed on the glittering ring displayed on Robin Hood's hand.

"I see," said the outlaw, laughing; "in your opinion, every man who wears

Lincoln green must be a forester and a Saxon."

"It does not follow," rejoined the landlord, in grumbling tones. "I meant no offence. Is everything to your liking?"

"There is so much," Robin Hood replied as he looked at the table, which seemed to groan under the weight put upon it, "that I will tell you when our appetites are satisfied."

Peter Matherson bowed and went out, leaving Robin Hood and Harold at the table. The outlaw's appetite was sharpened by his long ride, but Harold Maystone ate but little.

"You are tired, and had better to bed at once," Robin Hood said. "I'll follow soon after sundown; but not before I am sure the room they appoint me is fitted with strong locks and bolts."

"You fear treachery?"

"I and some of my best followers very nearly fell into a trap in a certain similar inn," Robin Hood replied. "I'll be careful, never fear; for what misery would follow if I were to lose the ring!"

"Pardon, sir; but why wear it so that all can see?"

"Because I know not at what moment I may be challenged. There, there, boy, the long journey has overtaxed you. A long sleep will do you good."

But Harold Maystone gave no sign of moving. He sat fingering the handle of the long dagger in his belt, and listening for he knew not what.

At length the outlaw pushed his platter away and leaned back in his chair.

"I'll go out and see what the town is like," he said. "Stay you here, Harold."

"No, my master; much rather would I go with you." And Robin Hood allowed Harold to have his way.

Peter Matherson met them at the gate.

"Sir," he said, "one moment, I pray. My servants have prepared for you a room over this archway. It is both comfortable and secure, I can assure you."

"I will see it anon. Where will you bestow this lad?"

"He must sleep on the ground floor," the landlord replied. "My house is full of guests."

"My faith, they are quiet enough."

"At all events, there will be a grand company in my house to-night," came the quick retort.

"Look, master, at the red glare yonder!" broke in Harold, in tones of alarm. "What does it forebode?"

Robin Hood turned in the direction pointed by the lad. He saw that a sudden red glow had come into the sky, and then thick clouds of wreathy smoke darkened the air.

"What does it mean?" he said, turning to Matherson. "If some house or farmyard were on fire, I trow you would not look on so calmly."

"Oh, there is nothing to be alarmed about," Matherson said, sniggering and shrugging his shoulders. "The baron's stewards are only burning out a few Jews."

"Heaven defend us! what is that you tell me?" cried Robin Hood, aghast.

"The explanation is simple enough," Matherson replied. "When the Saxons could pay the heavy taxes imposed on them by Baron Hazeldeane, he was satisfied, but when they became so poor and drifted away to the hills and woods, the baron called upon the Jews."

"Yes, yes, go on," said Robin Hood.

"When they pay without grumbling, all goes well, but if they dispute the baron's rights, his stewards take whatever they can lay hands on, and then burn the Jews out. That's all."

"All!" Robin Hood exclaimed. "Was anything so unjust, so villainous?"

"You'd better put a curb on your tongue, my master, in spite of the pretty ring you wear," Matherson said.

"See here! These Jews are usurers for the most part, and it is no sin to make them pay. I'll not vouch for the truth, but it is said, and almost openly, that while Richard pretends to defend the Jews, he pockets much of the spoil taken from them."

"If any man told me that in earnest, I would call him a liar to his teeth!" cried Robin Hood.

"You know the king, then?"

"Perchance I have met him."

"You have! That ring upon your hand bears the royal signet," Matherson fairly shouted.

"Yes; and the king shall learn what is going on here," Robin Hood cried in his anger.

Just then there came the trampling of horses, a trumpet sounded, and the far end of the street was dotted with flashes of silk emblazoned with gold.

"The baron comes, and as he leaves some of his men here you can rebuke him for his treatment of the Jews," Matherson said maliciously.

At that moment the procession came well in sight, and Robin Hood's face underwent a sudden change, for the man next to the one bearing the baron's banner was none other than—Gildron.

Without a word of warning Robin Hood seized the landlord by the nape of his neck and hurled him with such force into the street that he rolled over and over.

"Close the gates, Harold!" the outlaw cried, whipping his sword from its sheath. "By all that is evil and unlucky, we have fallen upon a hornets' nest. Follow me!"

Sword in hand, he rushed into the inn.

"Listen, you women-folk!" he cried. "I have closed and barred those gates because my life is in danger. Let no one attempt to open them, or I shall forget that the man who strikes a woman is a coward!"

In the meantime, Peter Matherson, whose face had been bruised and cut with the fall, was hammering at his own gates and demanding admission.

And then came other sounds, the noise of trampling feet, the hoarse murmur proclaiming the presence of a mob, and the stern voice of a man born to command, shouting for the gates to be thrown open.

Robin Hood did not flinch. There was no pallor on his face, no quivering of the lips, although he knew that once Gildron caught sight of him, even the king's signet would not save him.

"Harold," he said, quite calmly, "for me to attempt to escape would be worse than useless. I can only hope for delay. Hide you, then, and when I am gone

haste to Sherwood and tell my men what has happened."

"I'll not leave you," Harold cried, clinging to his hand.

"Tush, boy! Do not anger me. I cannot fight a troop of horse single-handed, nor dare I show myself at a window, for a dozen bolts from those Norman crossbows would greet me. The king's ring may save me yet, but in any case do as I tell you. Hide in a loft over the stables, and if I come not to you before curfew, take what horse you can, and away to Sherwood."

So saying, Robin Hood pressed his purse into Harold's hand and pushed him away.

The women of the inn had rushed upstairs, and the ostler, on seeing that the outlaw had drawn his sword, had bolted into a corn-bin and pulled the lid down over him, so that Robin Hood's conversation with Harold had not been overheard.

"Oh, Robin Hood! Robin Hood! best of friends to the poor, they will kill you," Harold moaned. Then his manner changed. "Stay!" he added, "I must put aside this weakness, for I may save him yet."

Darting into a stable he climbed a ladder and crept into a great heap of straw, and lay listening with quaking heart, yet longing to be at Robin's side, and, if needs be, die for him.

In the meantime the outlaw stood waiting what he knew must happen. He had been deceived with regard to the premises, believing there to be a back gate, but, discovering his error, he resolved to meet his enemies.

Soon the gate gave way with a crash, and a number of armed men rushed in.

"Hold!" cried Robin Hood, stepping forward. "I'll have you beware of how you treat me. Behold the king's signet! I go at his own request to his court in London."

"I care not for fifty signets!" Gildron cried. "This villain is Robin Hood, the murderer of Normans."

The men had fallen back at the sight of the king's signet, thus making room for the fierce Baron Hazeldeane.

"Are you Robin Hood?" he demanded.

"I do not deny it," the outlaw replied. "What is that to you? This is my passport, and you had best beware to regard it in its full significance."

"I have heard how the king undertook a foolish mission to Sherwood Forest, and how you, hearing of his coming, got up a mountebank show for his reception," the baron said.

"False! As false as that hound Gildron."

"Hubert Gildron is my kinsman," Baron Hazeldeane replied, "and he has told me the story of his wrongs. Your men dragged him like a felon through the forest."

"He deserved it! He deserved to be dragged on a hurdle."

"He confesses his infamy!" Gildron shrieked. "He told lies by the hundred to the king, while I sat gagged with a flint stone by the fiends he calls his followers."

"Oh, unspeakable villain!" Robin Hood cried. "Oh, skulking rat!"

"I'll have no more of this," Baron Hazeldeane said. "Yield yourself, prisoner."

"I have no other choice," Robin said.

"I'll send the signet to his majesty and tell him that I have you in my safe keeping," the baron continued.

Robin Hood could ask no more, and inclined his head without replying.

"Make way there!" cried the baron. "Get forward, Hubert; the prisoner must not be insulted nor maltreated."

Robin Hood's horse was brought from the stable, and the outlaw, breaking his sword across his knee, climbed into the saddle.

"By the trees of Sherwood," he said, smiling on the gaping crowd, "it is a novelty to find myself prisoner, although I have been used to escorting many an unwilling guest to my forest home."

"Stay yet a moment," exclaimed Peter Matherson. "What has become of the stripling who was in company with this man?"

No one could tell save the ostler, who having just crawled out of the corn-bin stated that Harold had slipped away with the crowd.

"Lucky for him," Gildron said, grinning maliciously. "If I had caught

him I would have put an end to his perverseness for ever."

A great crowd followed Robin Hood to the castle, and once there, he was hurried to a dungeon and heavily chained.

He relied entirely upon Harold reaching Sherwood, or spreading the news so that it reached the ears of his faithful foresters. It is true that Baron Hazeldeane might take the signet to Richard; but the outlaw had not much faith in the nobleman. But delay was everything to Robin Hood.

Oppressed by fatigue, he was soon asleep, and in his dreams was transported back to Sherwood. The crash of the door soon after daybreak brought him back to consciousness, to discover that the dungeon was full of armed men.

Hubert Gildron was there to sneer at and revile him, and with him was Basil de Vaux.

The new owner of Nottingham Castle glared sternly at the outlaw.

"So," he said, "I look at last upon the wretch who murdered my uncle!"

"You look upon the man who punished a vile wretch," Robin Hood replied. "I rid the world of a tyrant whose hands were red with blood of hundreds of innocent victims!"

"Listen!" Basil de Vaux said. "The news of your capture brought me here in all haste, for I could not rest until I had feasted my eyes on such a villain as you. Baron Hazeldeane has left for London, and you are in my custody."

Robin Hood's heart sank a little, but his face betrayed no sign of fear.

"I have the right to claim your body," Basil de Vaux continued. "The law is on my side, and the king cannot interfere. I care not what message he sends, for you shall die before it arrives."

"Cowardly wretch!" cried Robin Hood. "Would you murder me in cold blood?"

"You shall die; but not yet," Basil de Vaux replied. "There is plenty of time, for it is my will to have some sport with you."

"You call yourself noble, and boast of your chivalry," Robin Hood said. "Give me lance, sword, or axe, and meet me

like a man! Nay, place me in the castle courtyard, and let me face six of your picked men. Then you shall see that I will give good account of myself."

"You shall have neither lance, sword, nor axe," replied Basil de Vaux, in a tone of bitter mockery. "Yet I promise that you shall fight, and I will see the combat!"

Robin Hood's spirits began to revive. Every moment was precious to him.

"I care not whatever advantage my antagonist may have," the outlaw said. "I will not shrink from the fight!"

Hubert Gildron laughed; but Basil de Vaux silenced him with a stern glance.

"Your opponent shall have no other weapons save those nature has provided him with," De Vaux rejoined.

"You speak to me in riddles. What mean you? Who, then, is to be my antagonist?"

Hubert Gildron rushed to the dungeon door.

"Ho, there, keeper!" he shouted. "Rouse up the baron's friend, and let him speak."

Almost instantly a tremendous roar rang through the gloomy passages.

"You heard that?" Basil de Vaux said. "When Baron Hazeldeane returned from the crusade he brought with him a half-grown Nubian lion, and it is my will that you and the lion shall try a bout."

"Hear me," Robin Hood said, still undismayed. "You will, at least, order the removal of these chains?"

"From your hands only. I will not trust you too far, miscreant."

"But you will allow me some weapon, even if it be but a dagger?"

"None, I tell you," replied Basil de Vaux. "I will give you some hours to consider how you can best defend yourself; then look to the roaring of the lion."

"And look you, inhuman beast," cried Robin Hood, "for a violent death, whether I live or perish. I defy you! I have fought with and beaten men fiercer and wilder than beast, so why should I fear the lion? Begone, and leave me in peace."

No sooner was the door closed than Robin Hood flung himself down on the

stone bench, to which his fetters were riveted. The dungeon in which he was confined was above ground, lofty, and vaulted. Along one side ran a gallery, communicating with the ground floor at the back of the castle, and within an easy distance of the great courtyard, where the men practised deeds of arms.

Robin Hood was as brave and true as steel, but Basil de Vaux's threat filled him with horror, for, after all, he was only a man.

Food and water were brought to him twice that day, and then night fell. The last ray of light gliding slowly along the dungeon wall vanished through the barred loophole, and left the dismal place pitch dark.

"I must sleep," Robin Hood murmured, throwing himself on the heap of straw which his gaolers had mercifully thrown at his feet. "I must not let weakness overcome me."

Pillowing his head upon his arm, he stretched his fettered limbs and closed his eyes in slumber.

He dreamt again of the forest—of its bright, green trees, of its flowers, ferns, and bubbling springs. The antlered stag went rushing by him; the golden pheasant whirled over his head, and then——

"And 'tis good to wander the bowers among,
And listen at eve to the wild bird's song."

Robin Hood lifted his head and listened. Whose voice was it that set every drop of blood in his veins tingling? Was it part of his dream? No; it came again, very softly, but distinct:

"The glades of Sherwood are bright and fair,
And sweet the hum of the wild bee there;
And 'tis good to lie 'neath the green tree tall
And list to the rush of the waterfall.
But dearer to Robin Hood is far
The rush of war! war! glorious war!"

"What means this?" the outlaw exclaimed, struggling to his feet. "Is this place haunted? Am I going mad?"

Climbing on the bench he drew himself up as far as his fetters would allow.

"Who speaks?" he demanded, sending his voice in a loud whisper through the loophole.

"'Tis I, Harold Maystone."

"In the name of all that is wonderful, how came you here?" cried Robin Hood, lost in amazement.

"I swam the moat and climbed the outer wall."

"But what of the sentry?" demanded Robin Hood, scarcely believing the evidence of his ears.

"He lies in the moat, and there he will lie until the baron's men fish him out," Harold Maystone replied. "For your sake I pushed him from the wall and sent him to his doom."

"Brave lad!" Robin Hood exclaimed. "But tell me all. Have you been to Sherwood or sent news thither that I am imprisoned?"

"I will tell you all as quickly as I can," said Harold, who was hanging on by the protruding flints outside the dungeon. "It was night before I escaped from the inn, but I could not secure my horse, or yours, so I ran until I came to a field in which I saw a pony grazing——"

"And you borrowed it for the nonce," Robin Hood chuckled. "Say on."

"It was hard work to get along, as I had neither bridle nor rein, yet the beast led me to such good luck that tears of thankfulness came into my eyes."

"Quick! quick! You speak so slowly! You set my blood on fire!" Robin Hood said.

"At sunrise I found myself off the main road," Harold continued, "and, right ahead of me, I saw a friar riding a dapple-grey horse."

"A friar, you say!" Robin Hood ejaculated breathlessly.

"Yes, Friar Tuck. I told him all, and he wept for your misfortunes. He said that something compelled him to follow in your wake, for you had done a foolish act to attempt such a journey without support."

"I see it now," Robin Hood said, gloomily. "I relied upon the king's signet."

"Friar Tuck bade me find out in what part of the castle you were lodged, even if it cost me my life, and then, turning his horse, he galloped away."

"Hope fills my heart again," Robin Hood said. "Brave lad, we shall meet

under the blue sky again. Oh, splendid friar, you and all I love will not leave me. But you must go, Harold. Others will come soon, and if you are caught, I tremble at the thought of how they will treat you."

"I go," Harold replied. "But before I depart I beg of you to take this which I am sending through the bars. Loosen the string by which I lower it."

It was Harold's dagger—a long, keen blade, and one of Osbert the Armourer's very best manufacture.

"Oh! that I could take you to my arms," Robin Hood said as he bit the string through and hid the dagger in his doublet. "But pray you go for your own sake. Yet, stay! Where will you lodge?"

"Under hedge, in leafy tree, or sunken ditch," Harold replied. "Fear not for me. I shall watch with yearning eyes for the cloud of dust that will tell me of the foresters galloping to your rescue. I go now. Good-night."

"Heaven be praised!" Robin Hood cried, sinking on his knees. "There is hope indeed if Friar Tuck can only get the men here by to-morrow. Yet it will be a tremendous task. Will they accomplish it?"

He put away his gloomy thoughts lest they should keep him awake through the long watches of the night, and soon he slept again.

At length the morning broke dull and heavily, and soon there sounded the tramp of men marching towards the dungeon.

The bolts were removed and the door was thrown open, admitting Basil de Vaux and three sturdy henchmen.

"The time has come for your courage to be put to the test," Basil de Vaux said, keeping in the background. "The lion is hungry, and clawing at the bars of his cage."

"What! will not your black, revengeful heart let you rest?" Robin Hood said. "I thought you would not disturb me until sundown?"

"I am longing to give the lion a meal," Basil de Vaux replied brutally. "Ho, there! Remove the fetters from his hands, and guard him well to the courtyard."

"Will the dagger serve me to keep the brute off?" thought Robin Hood. "I fear it. The Fates conspire against me! But courage, man—courage! You have looked death in the face too often to fear it now."

At one end of the courtyard was a gallery, approached by a flight of stone stairs, with a heavy iron gate at the base.

Under the gallery was the lion's cage, and above it on the gallery were Hubert Gildron and a favoured few invited to see such a spectacle as was performed in the Roman arenas, when men, in spite of their wealth and learning, were more cruel than the beasts that devoured the hapless victims of a pagan age.

The keeper of the lion stood ready, rope in hand, to open the cage, and so impatient was he that De Vaux and his men had scarcely time to rush up the stairs, banging the iron gate behind them, when the lion was set free to attack its human foe.

Man and brute fixed their eyes on each other. Robin Hood, with one hand in his doublet clutching the hidden dagger, scarcely breathed, and seemed more like a statue than a living being.

Gradually the lion crouched, and then placing its head close to the flagstones it crawled round the courtyard.

The brute was at present too astonished at finding itself free to attack the man whose eyes followed it everywhere, and whose muscles were steeled for the dreadful conflict which he knew must come sooner or later.

"By Jupiter!" Hubert Gildron cried, "the lion will not touch him. This man bears a charmed life, but I'll break the spell. Ho, there! Bring me a cross-bow and a sheaf of steel bolts."

"Tush, man!" replied De Vaux; "the lion is only a little dazed, and will soon recover. Stir the brute up, keeper, or I shall think that you have been guilty of treachery."

"I'll rouse the lion," the keeper growled savagely.

Snatching a torch from the hand of one of his attendants, he hurled it at the head of the lion. The brute answered

with a roar of defiance and rage, and turned suddenly upon Robin Hood.

The outlaw, cool and collected, and prepared for the worst, drew the dagger from his doublet.

"See there!" Gildron cried. "The fellow has a weapon after all. There has been treachery. Take the dagger from him."

"What man dare descend!" De Vaux cried. "Fool! go down and take the dagger from him yourself."

"The man who calls me a fool shall answer for it!" Hubert Gildron hissed.

"There is time to boast," De Vaux replied scornfully. "Let us see what use Robin Hood will make of his dagger."

The enraged lion, now certain of its prey, crouched again and, opening its enormous jaws, sprang.

Robin Hood caught the beast by the throat with his left hand, but so great was the shock that he dropped to his knees, yet he had time to thrust the dagger down the lion's throat.

A tremendous struggle now took place.

The lion roared with pain and fury, and although the outlaw was nearly swooning he withdrew the dagger and thrust again and yet again.

Then, overcome with loss of blood, the lion sank writhing with pain to the ground, and crawled, groaning, conquered, and dying, back to its cage.

Madly excited by his furious encounter, and bathed in the blood of the lion, Robin Hood cried out exultantly:

"Now are you satisfied, De Vaux, and you, too, Hubert Gildron? See! the lion is dead."

"Say you so!" De Vaux exclaimed. "Then back to your dungeon you shall go. Ho, there, guards, secure him. If he resists cut him down."

"Fear not," Robin Hood replied. "I have done enough for one day. Noble beast," he added, turning to the dead lion; "you would have spared me but for these brutal Normans. Come, guards," throwing the dagger down, "I am ready. This weapon has shed better blood than flows in the veins of the tyrants you serve, and it shall not be disgraced by being turned upon them."

CHAPTER 5.

King Richard Keeps His Promise.

Hot and half-dead with fatigue, Friar Tuck had reached Sherwood, spreading the news of Robin Hood's captivity as he went.

And from every house that sheltered Saxons there came determined men, who, armed with every conceivable weapon, hastened to the ranks of the foresters.

If Robin Hood must die, then thousands of Saxons would know the reason why.

Out rode Little John, Will Scarlet, and all the leaders, followed by such as had horses, and bidding those on foot lose no time.

If Robin Hood perished, then should Baron Hazeldeane's castle be razed to the ground.

Great beams were thrown into wagons to act as battering-rams, carts were piled with dry brushwood, and others with torches. The whole country was alive with Saxons, and no Norman durst show his face.

"Ride forward—ride forward, good Friar Tuck," Little John said, swinging his axe in the air. "I cannot leave these men, lest the news of our coming reaches the castle, and a force is sent to intercept us."

Refreshed with but a few hours' rest, a meal, and a draught of wine, Friar Tuck said a fond farewell to his ass Balaam lest he should never see that faithful beast again; and mounting a horse well up to his weight, took at once to the back roads leading to St. Benet's.

Little John had foreseen what would happen. The news of their coming spread, and soon reached the ears of Hubert Gildron and Basil de Vaux.

A horseman had brought it, bidding the garrison prepare for invasion, and galloped off again in hot haste to the country beyond.

This happened on the morning after Robin Hood's encounter with the lion.

Basil de Vaux flew into a violent passion.

"By the bones of the Conqueror!" he cried, "I will cheat these Saxon churls. Ho! bring out the timber that makes up

the scaffold for traitors. Robin Hood shall die before the castle. Send for the executioner and bid him sharpen his axe. There is yet time for revenge on the villain who slew Oswald de Burgh, and then——"

"Ay, what then?" demanded Hubert Gildron. "What will become of us?"

"We will take horse to the coast, and thence to France. I have staunch friends there who will supply us with men and money."

While these orders were being carried out, there sat amid the topmost branches of a high tree at the far end of the town a lad who never ceased to gaze in the direction of Sherwood Forest.

The lad was Harold Maystone, and his heart misgave him. Would the cloud of dust, telling of the coming of the foresters, never dim the distant sky? Often he hoped, and as often fear oppressed him.

Turning towards the town, he heard the noise of mallets and hammers. The scaffold upon which Robin Hood was to die was being hastily put together.

And Robin Hood! His gaolers rushed into his dungeon and, surrounding him, struck off his iron fetters, bound him with cords, and told him that he was to perish by the axe.

"It is a knightly death," he said, calmly. "But why all this haste? Surely De Vaux and Gildron might be satisfied with my exertions of yesterday, and grant me some rest?"

"Not so," replied one of the gaolers. "It is time you parted with your head, for the fellows who call themselves the followers of the King of Sherwood Forest are hastening hither."

"And come they will!"

"But not in time."

"That is for Heaven to decide, not you or I," Robin Hood said quietly.

Out from the castle they led him, watching him, thinking, hoping that he would flinch at the sight of the axe and block. But they did not yet know the man who could cope with a lion and then hurl the only weapon he possessed with scorn at the feet of his oppressors.

"Friend," he said to the executioner, "I do not hold this to be your work.

Take my forgiveness, and all I ask is——"

"Hold!" cried a voice. "This man, whatever his crimes may be, must not and shall not die unconfessed!"

"What varlet interrupts?" De Vaux thundered. "Down with him on the block!"

"It is I—a father of the Holy Church."

The spectators fell back as a cowed priest pushed his way to the scaffold and mounted it.

"Back!" cried the executioner—"back, I say, I am going to strike!"

The priest flung off his cowl, revealing the features of Friar Tuck, who, seizing the executioner by the throat with his left hand, flung up his right arm.

"Ho, there! A rescue! A rescue!" he cried. "Who will dare to harm a hair of Robin Hood's head?"

"Cut the meddling priest down, and strike the outlaw's head from his shoulders!" De Vaux shrieked in a fury. "Hark! What is that?"

It was an uproar such as had never before greeted his ears.

Then flashed into the air a hail of arrows, bearing down the men guarding the scaffold; and following that, as in a dream, De Vaux saw Robin Hood, unbound and free, lying upon the strong arm of Little John.

"Verily," said Friar Tuck, looking down on the scene beneath him, "although I am a man of peaceful habits, yet would I dearly love to have my quarter-staff with me just now!"

The Normans fled helter-skelter, some into the castle, and others where they could.

"Now for the castle!" roared Little John. "It swarms with rats, and we will have them out."

The next moment he was astounded by a shout that made him think he had gone mad.

"The king! The king! Make room for the king!"

Bewildered at the sight that met his eyes, Richard the Lion-Hearted, attended by a train of nobles who had accompanied him as far as the borders of Sherwood Forest, rode up.

"By the plains of Palestine!" he exclaimed, "what means this scene of death and discord? We were delayed on our road to London, and the baron Hazeldeane overtook us, therefore we turned back. Speak, Robin Hood!"

A few words sufficed to inform the king of what had happened.

"Where is Baron Hazeldeane?" he thundered.

"I am shut out of my own castle, sire," the baron replied, trembling.

"Then, by our Lady of Victories," cried the king, "we will soon have it open. This scaffold shall form a raft, and if these traitors do not surrender at the bidding of my voice, they shall die like common felons."

The raft was floated, but before it could be put to use some of the men within the castle, being stricken with fear, lowered the drawbridge.

King Richard was the first to rush across, and snatching Little John's powerful axe he showered blow after blow on the portcullis, splintering it like matchwood.

The men within the lodge fled precipitately, for Hubert Gildron and Basil de Vaux had already taken themselves to the maze of passages that ran beneath the castle.

In a few minutes the vast building was full to overflowing.

"Come hither, Robin Hood," said the king, "and you, too, Little John and Friar Tuck. I vow that you shall see justice done, or I have no right to the throne of England. Ho, there! Search the castle, and bring me Hubert Gildron and Basil de Vaux."

Soon they were brought before him.

"I am your prisoner, Sir King," said Basil de Vaux, "but not subject to you here. I will attend you at Court when summoned."

King Richard threw back his head and laughed.

"By my soul," he said, "it would seem that you are in a mood for jesting, yet you shall find that it is no jesting matter. I have heard that my brother John paid in promises; I pay in deeds. Ho, there! Some four or five of you take this fellow and hang him from the battlements, as a warning to all who

hold in scorn Richard's signet. Away with him, I say!"

"I claim my knightly privilege to be arraigned before a tribunal, and if found guilty to fall by the axe," De Vaux said.

"Do you, indeed!" cried Richard. "Then we will begin in proper fashion. Call me hither the castle cook."

"Heaven help me!" exclaimed that terrified domestic as he was hurried into the presence of the king. "What have I done?"

"Nothing, my good fellow, except to send up good meals for bad men to eat," the king replied. "Now take an axe and hack off yonder knight's spurs."

The cook instantly obeyed.

"Now, De Vaux!" shouted the infuriated king, "you have no claim to knight-hood. You stand disgraced as a common robber—a seller of a sword which belongs to me—a dealer in tyranny and blood!"

Baron Hazeldeane flung himself at the king's feet.

"Richard of England," he cried, "as you are powerful so be merciful. Forgive him and he will never forget your clemency."

"I cannot!" replied Richard sternly. "And mark me, baron, you have had a narrow escape yourself, for you had no right to arrest Robin Hood while he wore my signet upon his finger. No, by my faith! Basil de Vaux shall die, and I will bestow the castle and estates of Nottingham upon a better man."

De Vaux uttered an unearthly cry as his executioners seized him and dragged him away.

"As for you, Hubert Gildron," continued the king, "I saw you not long since in Sherwood Forest when I was so well entertained. I placed my life in the hands of these foresters, and they did me no harm. They gave you the chance of fighting a man you had thrown into prison, and you slunk away, as slips an otter under water when the hounds are on its track. Have you aught to say in your defence?"

Hubert Gildron hung his head and remained silent.

"By St. George!" the king said, rising and stretching out his hand, "things

have come to a pretty pass in this, my kingdom. My brother's treachery has made me so many enemies that I scarce know where to look for a friend. What! not a word? Your silence proclaims your guilt, and so, as you deserve, you shall hang at the side of De Vaux."

"I pray you, sire," said Robin Hood, "let me deal with him. As I saw him in the courtyard yesterday, so I would see him again on horseback, and I on another, with swords in our hands."

"So shall it be," cried the king, with a roar of delight. "Let us to the courtyard. Bring two horses and swords. We'll see the end of this and then depart, for we have earnest business to attend to in London."

"What will be done if my arms prevail?" Hubert Gildron demanded.

"May my body be thrown into a ditch if that happens," Robin Hood replied in a bantering voice. "And more; if I fall, I ask the king to give you your worthless life."

"I'll think of it," said Richard gloomily. "But what means this?" he cried, leaping to his feet and clutching his axe. "Are we again to set?"

Along the passage leading to the spacious apartment in which this scene was taking place came an uproar, which soon resolved itself into loud cheers, and presently Harold Maystone, carried shoulder high, was borne in.

Trumpets sounded as Robin Hood and Hubert Gildron mounted the horses brought to them.

"Good son Robin," Friar Tuck said, coming to his side, "see that you make no mistake. 'Twere almost a pity that you did not let him hang with the other wretch!"

"Trust me," Robin Hood replied; "I will be swift and sure."

The trumpets sounded again, and King Richard raising his hand, covered with glittering mail, cried:

"Forward both, and Heaven defend the right!"

The combatants rode furiously to meet each other, Robin Hood for vengeance, Hubert Gildron hoping to save his life by a lucky blow.

But soon he discovered how poor was the chance.

Engaging with him, Robin Hood pierced him lightly in the neck, and then, making a mocking bow, rode past and wheeled his horse again.

Next time he wounded Hubert Gildron more severely, and as the wretched man reeled in the saddle Robin Hood, showing far more mercy than had been shown to him, leaned forward and finished the fight with one final blow.

King Richard turned back to the hall, and calling the outlaw to him, said:

"And now, good Robin, I must part with you. Since you have undergone so much and need rest I will grant you further time. In a week from this I expect you at the Tower of London, where I shall then be holding my Court, and then you shall taste of my fare, as I have done of yours. Bring with you as many of your brave fellows as you will; and they shall act as yeomen of my bodyguard while they stay. Remember, in a week I expect you at the Tower!"

"And now," the king added, turning to Harold Maystone, "I have heard of your exploits, and I swear by my crown that when you come to London with Robin Hood you shall not leave without knightly honours. I love a brave, honourable lad, for brave and honourable lads make honourable men."

"Sire," said Robin Hood, "he deserves all you can say of him."

"That I well believe, and if it is your will you may call him Sir Harold from this moment. The ceremony I will perform in my own palace."

A mighty roar of applause greeted the king's words, and once more Harold was raised shoulder-high, and his hands shaken until he begged his admirers to leave him in peace.

"Can it be true?" said Little John, sitting down when the king had gone.

"Can what be true, you big baby?" Friar Tuck demanded.

"Why, that we must call young Maystone Sir Harold, and that we are going to London to be the guests of the king."

"Ah," said Friar Tuck, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, "I see what you are thinking of most. My faith! I can picture you swaggering among nobles and ladies of high degree. But here comes Robin Hood."

"Ho, there!" cried the King of Sherwood, striding along. "Where is Baron Hazeldeane?"

"He has shut himself up in his own chamber," replied one of the baron's attendants.

"Bid him come to me," said Robin Hood. "He must bear the expense of the good Saxons travelling so far to do me a service. It is no fault of theirs that a large number of them had no occasion to strike a blow."

Humbled and miserable, the baron sat in a small, square apartment with very thick walls and a double iron door.

He was hoping that Robin Hood would be satisfied with his victory, and return to Sherwood to prepare for his visit to the king, when suddenly he was startled by a loud knocking.

He made no answer, and for some minutes he was left undisturbed. Then came the crash of an axe, and the outer door splintering like glass he ran to the other, and throwing it open, found himself confronted by Little John and Robin Hood.

The giant swung over his shoulder the axe that had done so much mischief, and Robin Hood, advancing towards the baron, placed his hand on his shoulder.

Baron Hazeldeane thought that his last hour had come, and became livid with fear.

"Tush, man! I do not require your head," Robin Hood said. "I only wish to know in what part of the castle you keep your coffers."

"The king did not give you permission to rob me!" the baron gasped.

"Rob you—no! I ask not a penny for myself, but I do ask you to be generous," the outlaw replied. "Come, baron, you had best not trifle with the matter, for in spite of all my power over the Saxons I may not be able to hold them in check. You must find ten thousand crowns, or I leave at once."

"I have not so much money in the castle," the baron groaned.

"I will give a quarter to the Saxons, that their expenses shall be paid, and hold your jewels as security."

"I must submit," the baron replied in a dismal voice. "Follow me."

"Ah," said Robin Hood, laughing, "I

see that you have your keys quite handy."

The baron, shivering with rage and despair, conducted Robin Hood and Little John to a secret room built in the wall, and as the light flared in several iron chests were seen.

"By Jove! a goodly show even for a Norman baron," quoth Little John.

"Open the chests," commanded Robin Hood. "Ha! Seas of silver and gold, I declare. Heaven! how you must have punished the poor Saxons to acquire all this wealth! There are the poor Jews, too; something must be done for them."

"Take what you will and begone," was all the baron said.

"Not so fast with your tongue, Norman," Robin Hood cautioned sternly. "This is only an act of justice. Count out the sum I demanded, and five thousand more crowns for the Jews."

"Five crowns go to a noble," Little John said. "The counting, methinks, will take some time."

"Then help him," Robin Hood replied, "and summon further aid. Sound a few notes on your horn, good John, and I trow that it will not take some of our friends long to find their way here."

And soon the baron saw, with tearful eyes, his hoard of ill-gotten gains vanishing into bags and bulging wallets.

At length Robin Hood cried, "Hold, enough!" and then, turning blandly to the baron, said, "My thanks, Norman. And now, sir, we will dine, and have music, too. Yet stay! There is such a sight from the battlements as admits of no festivity. I'll not be merry in the presence of even the dishonoured dead. A few of us will dine at the inn, and the rest where their fancy takes them. Adieu, baron; we may meet again."

"If we do," thought Baron Hazeldene, gritting his teeth, "I hope it will be an unexpected meeting, where there will not be anyone to see."

The outlaw read his thoughts, and smiled.

"Be not too confident," he said. "It is folly to count blows before they are struck. Nay, curse not. Let me tell you an adage as old as yonder hills. Curses are like chickens, and always

come home to roost. Repair the injuries you have done, and leave Robin Hood in peace, or by Heaven I will visit you with such a punishment as you little dream of. Come, my merry men—come."

When Peter Matherson, host of the inn, saw Robin Hood approaching, he, fearing instant death, fell upon his knees and cried for mercy.

"Get on your feet, churl," the outlaw said. "I will do you no harm. Go to your kitchen and bid your people to prepare dinner for six, and place your best chair at the head of the table for the newly-created knight, Sir Harold Maystone."

"And I'll bear him to it, and be his cup-bearer afterwards!" cried Little John, hoisting the lad on his shoulder.

"Fore Heaven, you make me blush," Sir Harold said. "Have done, I say. But for Robin Hood and you, his gallant followers, Hilda's father would be now hanging in chains outside Nottingham Castle for Normans to gape at."

"And but for you," replied Robin Hood, "the Normans would have made a sorry end of me. Carry him in, John—carry him in. We cannot make too much of him."

While the party feasted at the inn a great crowd gathered outside, cheering, dancing, and singing in honour of Robin Hood and his merry men.

Later on minstrels came, and at length, when darkness set in, played sweet music until word was sent to them that the outlaw had gone to his well-deserved repose.

CHAPTER 6.

The Tournament at Smithfield.

Two days later Robin Hood, attended by his chief officers and fifty picked archers, started for London.

The news of his coming had gone before him. At Edgware, Tottenham, and Islington crowds of people gathered to meet him, all anxious to see the outlaw.

It was midday when the Sherwood foresters reached the Tower. Amid a flourish of trumpets Robin Hood, with Little John on his right and Will

Scarlet on his left, passed through the gates of this royal fortress and were met by Richard in person.

When they had partaken of refreshment, and removed the stains of long travelling from their liveries, a summons was sent to Robin Hood and his officers to appear in the council-chamber.

Here sat the king on a throne, and round about him were the barons and nobility, who gazed curiously at the outlaw as he made his obeisance to Richard.

Then, at a word from the monarch, Robin Hood told of Saxon wrongs, of house-burnings, murder, torture, and abduction.

"Sire," he said, in conclusion, "I will have done with tales of bloodshed, and instance a common case of cruelty. At Ruffington lived a widow, left with fifty roods of pasture land. One day the fences were torn down by a band of rangers, who gave the widow a paltry sum and bade her go, as her land interfered with the hunting of Sir Thomas Woolerton."

There was a movement among the splendidly-attired assembly round the throne.

"By Heaven, this comes strange to my ears!" Richard exclaimed, turning his head towards a group of nobles who were whispering and muttering. "But it is well that I should hear it, since Sir Thomas Woolerton is present. Sir Thomas, this amounts to a serious accusation. What have you to say in discharge of it?"

Sir Thomas Woolerton stepped forward. His face was dark and his glance forbidding as he fixed his eyes upon Robin Hood.

"Sire," he said, placing his hand—accidentally, as it were—upon his sword, "if I had known that my name was to be bandied about by an outlaw who happens to be in favour with your majesty, I would have come better prepared."

"That is no answer to my question," Richard cried angrily. "How! Am I to ask you who are to be my guests? I'll have you learn differently. You have heard Robin Hood. Spoke he the truth, or not?"

"The land he mentions was well paid

for," Sir Thomas Woolerton replied sullenly.

"Twenty crowns for fifty roods of land," said Robin Hood. "That was the price paid, and I have the proofs. Listen! The widow could find no other home in the village which had been her birthplace. Her money dwindled away, and she wandered from place to place, until one night she lay down in the snow."

"And is she dead?" Richard demanded, turning his flashing eyes upon Sir Thomas Woolerton.

"No. Friar Tuck found her and brought her to my retreat in Sherwood Forest, where she lives now, spinning, sewing, and cooking for my gallant foresters."

"You hear, Sir Thomas?" said the king. "What is your answer?"

"I decline to reply to any story hatched up by this mountebank in Lincoln green," replied the knight, hoarse with passion. "With your permission I will leave; I have no desire to stay in any company where my word is doubted."

"Hold!" Richard exclaimed, starting up. "You came at my desire, and so will leave. Your angry looks and prevaricating replies proclaim you guilty. By the splendour of Heaven, you are not worthy of the name you bear! Now, go hence, and never let me see your face again unless I summon you into my presence!"

"This is more than flesh and blood can bear!" Sir Thomas retorted. "I must obey; but if this man had any pretensions to being my equal I would challenge him to mortal combat."

"So be it, then," said Robin Hood. "My father was Robert Fitzooth, Earl of Huntingdon, and that by right is my title now."

"If that be true," Sir Thomas Woolerton roared, throwing down his gauntlet, "this is a matter that can be settled by deed of arms."

"It is as true as the statement you made is false," Robin Hood replied, picking up the gauntlet and returning it to the knight.

"Enough!" said Richard. "Tomorrow we hold a tournament and you

can meet then. Now let all depart peacefully, save such guests of mine who lodge within the Tower."

How the news got about London that Sir Thomas Woolerton and Robin Hood were to meet in combat it is impossible to say; but it had spread, and nothing else was talked of.

The lists in Smithfield had been finished on the preceding day, and ere the sun's beams had gilded London's spires thousands were on the spot, eager to witness the fight.

A raised platform had been erected for Richard and his courtiers, and it was soon filled with nobles and fair ladies, who in those days did not shrink from witnessing such encounters.

Just before noon a fanfare of trumpets, blown by richly attired heralds, announced the arrival of the king. He rode a pure white steed, and over his armour he wore a flaming robe, with long sleeves and hood pointed with fur.

It had been decided by the marshal

of the lists that the combat between Sir Thomas Woolerton and Robin Hood should not take place until after the third event.

"I know not in what case Robin Hood will be when he finds himself in armour," the king said to the noblemen about him.

"Perchance he will dispense with it altogether," said a voice.

Richard turned his head, and seeing Little John, smiled a greeting and then said:

"But surely Robin Hood will not do anything so foolish. He shall have the best arms, and my own armourer shall attend him if he wishes."

Just then Friar Tuck squeezed himself under the royal pavilion.

"It is not often that a man of peace likes to give advice," he said, loud enough for the king to hear; "but if I were asked I should say let Robin Hood look after his own business."

"A bold speech that," Richard de-

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clared, laughing. "I like brave words, come they from priest or layman; so, friar, you are forgiven. But where is Robin Hood? Where is his pavilion?"

At that moment the outlaw walked into the lists and, doffing his plumed hat, gravely saluted the king.

"Tush! Tush! This will never do!" Richard said. "How can broadcloth avail against armour? Go at once and attire yourself as you see yonder knights."

"If I did, sire," Robin Hood replied, "it would be the signal for laying down my life."

"Ho, there!" cried the marshal. "The sports are about to begin! Clear the lists!"

"Come to our pavilion and witness this conflict," the king said to Robin Hood. "It is between one Charles de Vere and Multon of Harwood. De Vere accuses Multon of treason during my absence, and hence this meeting. Quick, good Robin Hood, or the soldiers will sweep you from the lists."

Robin Hood had scarcely taken up a position near the king when a young knight appeared, with visor up, and after lowering the point of his lance as an act of submission and loyalty, he cried, in a clear, ringing voice:

"I am Charles de Vere, lord of Thorpdale, and I charge Multon of Harwood with foul treason against our sovereign king, and declare him to be a traitor—and this I will maintain with my body in the lists!"

Multon of Harwood, who was stationed at some distance from his challenger, drew nearer. He was sheathed in strong steel, and wore suspended from his helmet a hood of chain-mail reaching to his shoulders.

He rode a coal-black horse, and as he raised himself in the stirrups so as to display his strong form more fully, he replied:

"I, Multon of Harwood, deny these charges, and pronounce them to be false, and will disprove them with my body in the lists."

The champions then closed their visors and, slowly backing their horses, retired.

A loud flourish of trumpets then

sounded, and as it ceased the king's herald cried, in a loud voice:

"Forward, good knights, and may Heaven defend the right."

With levelled lances the combatants galloped furiously to meet each other.

The crash came, splintering lances flew upwards, and Multon of Harwood rolled from his horse and fell heavily on the ground.

But he was not done with yet. Freeing his foot from the stirrup, he was up in a moment.

"Dismount!" he cried to De Vere.

"Agreed!" the other shouted.

And now an exciting combat took place. Charles de Vere used both skill and caution as became the lighter man, and although Multon of Harwood showered blows on him with tremendous force, De Vere beat him off and brought him to his knees.

"Strike!" Multon of Harwood said, looking sullenly through the bars of his visor. "I ask not mercy at your hands."

"No," Charles de Vere replied; "I scorn to take an adversary at a disadvantage."

"Brave words from a brave knight," King Richard cried, throwing his baton into the lists as a sign for the combat to cease. "Let there be no more disputes between you."

A loud shout from the spectators went up as the two knights left the lists, their esquires following with the horses.

"What think you of that?" demanded the king, turning to Robin Hood.

"It was well done, sir," the outlaw replied.

"And will you still persist in fighting without armour?" asked Richard.

"Fain would I do so, if I break no law of the lists."

"I know of no law," the king responded. "But look to yourself; I fear that Sherwood Forest will never see you again."

Before the second event began Robin Hood slipped away unperceived, and was seen no more until the marshal shouted his name. Then, on the horse that had brought him to London, he

rode into the lists armed with shield, spear, and sword.

Not a vestige of armour did man or steed wear, and the face of the fierce Sir Thomas Woolerton darkened with an angry frown.

"He treats me with contempt," he said to his esquire; "but, by Heaven! he shall not live to leave these lists."

The preliminaries were soon arranged, and on the signal being given the foes advanced, Sir Thomas flourishing his lance contemptuously as an indication that he would soon dispose of the bold forester. But suddenly he checked his horse. There was something in Robin Hood's eyes that struck terror into his heart.

Then they sat for several moments regarding each other with fixed looks, each apparently unwilling to strike the first blow.

At length Sir Thomas Woolerton, spurring his horse, made a sudden plunge; but just as quickly Robin Hood avoided it.

"Well done!" roared a voice like thunder. "Well done, by Mars."

That voice was Little John's, and then another cried:

"I am a man of peace, and know but little of warfare, but methinks if the steel-clad knight makes such another mistake he will fall upon his helmet and batter it in upon his nose."

"Peace! peace, friar!" Little John growled. "There is nothing to make mirth about."

Maddened with rage, for he saw that Robin Hood was laughing at him, Sir Thomas Woolerton rushed blindly forward.

His rage cost him his life. With one dexterous movement, and with no more apparent exertion than if he was wielding a lath, Robin Hood passed the point of his lance under the knight's chin, and, lifting him clean out of his saddle, sent him flying backwards.

Immediately the lists were broken in spite of the threats and blows of the men-at-arms. Some crowded round the fallen knight, but an immense concourse surrounded Robin Hood and hailed him a glorious victor.

The body of the dead knight was

carried with all due solemnity from the lists, Friar Tuck following, for he, in spite of his joviality, was a reverend man.

Robin Hood was then led by the marshal to receive the congratulations of the king, but, to his astonishment, Richard was not there. No one had noticed his absence, all being engaged in witnessing the combat.

The marshal, overcome with surprise, declared the tournament to be at an end, and Robin Hood and his followers rode straight back to the Tower.

Scarcely had they arrived, however, when the outlaw received a command to attend the king at once, and on entering the royal apartment he found Richard pacing up and down.

"At the moment that Sir Thomas Woolerton fell," Richard said, "I received a message. It says that there is still dark work going on between my brother John and certain of my barons. The message comes from one who, I know, would not deceive me, and I could not stay at the tournament, for my soul was in arms, and there were certain men present who I felt I must slay with my own hand. Oh, the ingratitude of it! The villainy of it!"

Overcome with grief and rage, the king threw himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Be cheered, sire," Robin Hood said. "A few traitors may conspire against you, but you have many noble-minded men ready to die for you."

"What matters if fifty thousand swords flash from their sheaths at my word if my own brother is against me? And I forgave him—yes, I forgave him! Robin Hood," Richard added, "perchance I may ask a favour of you."

"It will be a favour, sire, even to think that it lies in my power to serve you."

"Then give me your hand, Robin Hood, best and bravest of men. Stay with me yet a few days, and then depart. If I should ask this favour of you, it shall be conveyed to your knowledge by trusty messenger."

"Let me leave Sir Harold Maystone with you, sire."

"Good thought!" exclaimed the king,

bringing his hands smartly together. "You lighten my heart. Robin Hood, I would trust you with my life."

"Once already you have done that thing, sire," the outlaw replied, "and should you do so again—nay, a thousand times—you will find that Robin Hood loves his king far too well to harm him."

Just a week after these events Robin Hood said farewell to the king and started on his return journey to Sherwood Forest. His visit to London had been one great triumph, and when he rode forth from the Tower he wore a magnificent chain round his neck.

The outlaw kept what the king told him a secret, but his heart was troubled and the future looked none too bright.

"I'll find out how matters are going," he thought, "and if I find that Prince John has really turned traitor after his brother's forgiveness, then I will make him captive and bring him to his knees before Richard's feet."

Thousands of people had lined the streets to see Robin Hood depart, and shouts of joy greeted him everywhere.

"By the rood!" said Friar Tuck; "our chief is as popular as the king himself. But what ails you, Little John? You look quite chapfallen in the midst of all this joy."

"There's joy enough and to spare," the giant replied. "But harken, friar! I hear ugly sounds amidst the cheering, and there are too many men scowling under their hoods for my liking. There will be envy and malice among the barons, and so—"

"Go on," urged the friar. "Why do you hesitate?"

"And so we had best look to ourselves," Little John added.

"Long live King Richard and Robin Hood, his friend," roared the crowd.

But mingling with the shouts came a voice crying:

"Long live Prince John, and death to the Saxons!"

"Heard you that?" Little John demanded of Friar Tuck.

"Ay, but what then?" replied the portly friar. "Show me a bushel of wheat without a speck of dirt and you will show me a wonder."

Little John shook his head.

"Give me life under the greenwood tree in preference to all this," he said. "Mark me, friar, there is great trouble ahead. Robin Hood knows it, but will not say so. Heigho! how I long to be back in the forest again!"

At length London was left behind, and all were as glad as Little John to be in the open country again. When the party was within half a day's journey of Nottingham a forester was espied.

"Dick Driver, as I live!" cried Robin Hood. "He is coming to meet us! E'o, good Dick! Why this haste?"

"Lightfeld, the franklin of Deepdale, desires to see you on most important business," Dick Driver replied.

"Lightfeld is a most worthy man, and I will see him at his home within three days. Did he state his business?"

"Only so far that he anticipates trouble."

Little John turned to Friar Tuck.

"What said I?" he demanded. "The struggle for freedom has but commenced. How will it end?"

"In victory," replied the friar. But whether he spoke truly will be told in future issues of our Library.

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